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THE INDICATIVE IN AN UNREAL CONDITION

I winna yield to a braken-bush,
Nor yet will I unto a brier;
But I would yield to Earl Douglass,
Or Sir Hugh Montgomery, if he *was* here.

—*Battle of Otterburn*, version B, date unknown. See Sargent and Kittredge's *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, p. 391.

If he *was* not a fool he would not suffer his business to be carried on by fools.—Pepys' *Diary*, July 12, 1667.

"Ah, brother," said Christian, "surely if I *was* right, he would now arise to help me."—Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*¹ (1684), p. 194.

And, behold, she saw as if a broad parchment *was* opened before her.—*Ibid.*, p. 216.

Our heart oftentimes wakes when we sleep, and God can speak to that, either by words, by proverbs, or by signs and similitudes, as well as if one *was* awake.—*Ibid.*, p. 268.

It looks as if something *was* written thereon.—*Ibid.*, p. 284.

Beauty of the body, which is the woman's glory, seems to be now unequally bestowed and nature (or rather Providence) to lie under some scandal about it, as if it *was* given a woman for a snare to men.—Defoe's *Academy for Women* (1697).

If I *was* not angry, I would immediately cause thee to be put to death.—Cotton's *Translation of Montaigne's Essays* (1700), chap. lxviii.

If I *was* not more afraid of tiring than of scandalising your lordship, I could quote, etc.—Bolingbroke's *Letter*, 4 (before 1750).

What would be left to me, if I myself *was* the man who softened . . . all the distinguishing colors of my life?—Burke's *Bristol Speech* (1774).

I suppose you would aim at him best of all, if he *was* out of sight.—Sheridan's *Rivals*, V, 3 (1775).

Was I in a desert, I would find out.—Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, I, 85 (1778).

Was this the only point to be determined, there would not remain a moment's doubt.—Letter of George Washington (1778), published in *Harper's Monthly*, January, 1907, p. 289.

¹ Though Bunyan's syntax is based chiefly on the Authorized Version of 1611, this use of the indicative occurs neither in the Bible nor in Shakspeare.

These citations show that *was* for *were* in an unreal condition is older than the date hitherto assigned. Matzner¹ quotes Sheridan's *Rivals* (1775) as the first occurrence. Dr. Murray² pushes the date back only to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (1684). Sweet³ says: "In the colloquial language of the last [18th] century, there was a tendency to substitute *was* for *were* even in clauses of rejection," that is, in unreal conditions. This statement is not strong enough. The tendency to use the indicative instead of the subjunctive was by no means confined to colloquial language. Nor is it confined to colloquial language today, as the following quotations from nineteenth-century writers show:

If it *was* not completely ridiculous, it would be something worse.—Byron's Preface to *The Vision of Judgment*.

I would not have said this for the world, if I *was* not a little anxious about my own girl.—Bulwer's *Money*, 3, 2.

What should I be, if I *was* deaf to the poverty and sorrows of others?—Bulwer's *Alice*, 1, 1.

Being unaware that the letter is not in his possession, he will proceed with his exactions as if it *was*.—Poe's *Purloined Letter*.

Altogether, it seems as if there *wasn't* any place for me in this world.—Letter of Sidney Lanier (see Mims's *Lanier*, p. 199).

Please read and answer this letter as though I *was* not President, but only a friend.—Letter of Lincoln to Grant, January 19, 1865.

Don't heed me any more than if I *was* a speaking machine.—Mr. Lorry in Dickens' *Tale of Two Cities*, chap. iv.

Sir, there is a villain at that Maypole that . . . will marry your son to that young woman as certainly and surely as if he *was* the Archbishop of Canterbury himself.—Sim Tappertit in Dickens' *Barnaby Rudge*, chap. xxiv.

There's enough . . . to pay for it, if it *was* a score of casks full.—Hugh, *ibid.*, chap. lii.

Do you suppose, if all this *was* true, that Mr. Haredale would be constantly away from home, as he is?—John Willet, *ibid.*, chap. liv.

¹ *Englische Grammatik*, II, 130.

² *Oxford Dictionary*, s. v. "be," p. 717.

³ *Syntaz*, § 2268.

How often, before I knew your trade, did I hear you talking of this as if it *was* a treat?—Hugh, *ibid.*, Vol. II, chap. xviii.

I wouldn't say much to him, master, if I *was* you.—Hugh, *ibid.*, Vol. II, chap. xix.

He'd write letters by the ream, if it *was* a capital offense.—Miss Trotwood in *David Copperfield*, Vol. II, chap. xxiii.

Now, you know, Copperfield, if I *was* Lord Chancellor we couldn't do this.—Traddles, *ibid.*, chap. xxxiii.

I feel as if I *was* doing wrong, though I am doing right.—Letter of Thackeray (see *Century Magazine*, Vol. LXVII, p. 504).

It would seem as if I *was* drunk, and not you.—Thackeray's *Virginians*, I, chap. x.

My servants said your negro man began to sing it in the kitchen as if he *was* a church organ.—*Ibid.*, I, chap. xxii.

She treats me as if I *was* a fool.—*Ibid.*, I, chap. xxxiv.

She keeps off from me as if I *was* a pestilence.—Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*, Book I, chap. xii.

I believe she would be glad if I *was* dead.—*Ibid.*, Book I, chap. xii.

If I *was* Cadogan, I would have a peerage for this day's work.—*Ibid.*, Book II, chap. xv.

Instantly it seems to him as if she removed herself from him infinitely and *was* a sacred precinct.—Emerson's *Essay on Love*.

If I *was* sure of thee . . . I should never think again of trifles.—Emerson's *Essay on Friendship*.

It looks as if I *was* going to send you the first three chapters of my Grandfather.—Robert Louis Stevenson's *Vailima Letters*, II, p. 176 (August, 1896).

They hear of the death of people about their own age, or even younger, not as if it *was* a grisly warning, but with a simple child-like pleasure.—Robert Louis Stevenson's *Aes Triplex*.

If the present *was* happy, I should try to live in that.—Robert Hichens in *Harper's Bazaar*, February, 1906, p. 116.

I have spoken as if the changes referred to were made "in the lump," that is, as if the word-order *was* first settled in every respect.—Jespersen's *Progress in Language*, § 76.

Nor could any other local standard be substituted for that of London

without manifest danger—even if the acceptance of such a standard *was* possible.—Brander Matthews' *Parts of Speech*, p. 68.

But a dip into the *Century Dictionary* again revealed that a Scotchman had not waited for an American to use the word [preparedness], and that it had been employed by Bain, not even as though it *was* a novelty.—*Ibid.*, p. 154.

If all the year *was* summertime,
And all the aim of life
Was just to lilt on like a rhyme—
Then I would be your wife.

If life *was* all a summer fête, etc.
—Ella Wheeler Wilcox's "An Answer" (in *Poems of Passion*, p. 89).

Many will complain that I am settling myself firmly in that field of antiquity, as if there *was* no other.—Matthew Arnold's *Letters*,¹ I, p. 55 (December 12, 1855).

It poured all night as if the sky *was* coming down.—*Ibid.*, I, p. 310 (May 23, 1865).

If it *was* not for this consideration, the exaggerated language of all the English newspapers . . . would be perfectly unaccountable.—*Ibid.*, I, p. 356 (October 24, 1865).

We have been fifteen years married, and it seems as if it *was* only last week.—*Ibid.*, I, p. 385 (June 10, 1866).

The whole feeling of this morning was as if I *was* looking at something quite unreal.—*Life and Letters of Dean Church*, p. 88.

The effect was as if he *was* working his own way.—*Ibid.*, p. 204.

I should feel more sympathy with Germany, if it *was* only a question of its being welded together.—*Ibid.*, p. 235.

If the Archbishop *was* so alarmed as to realise to himself the state of things, he might help us.—*Ibid.*, p. 337.

And so I began to feel as if the cloud *was* lifting.—*Ibid.*, p. 415.

I think if I *was* beginning again I should begin with a serious study of *Paracelsus*.—*Ibid.*, p. 415.

C. ALPHONSO SMITH

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¹ The only two sources from which I have attempted to reproduce all of the occurrences of this idiom are Matthew Arnold's *Letters*, Vol. I, and the letters in the *Life and Letters of Dean Church*.